

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

March 19, 2020

The Honorable Mark T. Esper
Secretary of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301-1000

Dear Secretary Esper:

We write with ongoing concern over the worldwide spread of the coronavirus (COVID-19). Specifically, we write to ask what preparations have been taken to limit exposure to and provide treatment of COVID-19 for U.S. servicemembers stationed in countries throughout the world.

While the Department of Defense recently announced restrictions on domestic travel for U.S. servicemembers, a recent report indicated that the actual number of servicemembers infected is likely undercounted. Officials have attributed this to the fact that many servicemembers tend to be of younger age, and in good physical health, thus allowing them to potentially become carriers of COVID-19 without exhibiting the types of symptoms that would require testing.^[1] With more than one million U.S. military personnel stationed abroad, servicemembers remain at risk to exposure to COVID-19. While this poses a significant challenge, it is essential that action be taken to provide as clear an assessment as possible of how many servicemembers are at greatest risk.

In two of the countries hit particularly by the spread of COVID-19, the United States maintains a substantial military presence. In South Korea, where there are nearly 28,000 troops stationed, there have been more than 8,000 cases.^[2] In Italy, which has seen the most cases of infections outside of China with nearly 36,000¹, more than 4,000 U.S. troops are stationed on 3 military bases. Italy is also the location of one of the few reported servicemembers to test positive.^[3]

What is particularly troubling are the dangers faced by U.S. forces serving in Afghanistan. It was recently revealed that there is “no availability of testing” for U.S. forces stationed in Afghanistan.^[4] In addition to the dangers that servicemembers deployed to Afghanistan face on a daily basis, many of the nearly 13,000 forces deployed in Afghanistan are deployed near Iran, which accounts for the third most reported cases of COVID-19 with nearly 13,000. It remains unclear what is being done to prepare for the possibility of a spike in COVID-19 cases among

^[1] <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-usa-pentagon/pentagon-says-coronavirus-cases-likely-higher-than-official-count-idUSKBN20X2PR>

^[2] <https://experience.arcgis.com/experience/685d0ace521648f8a5beeeee1b9125cd>

¹ <https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/geographical-distribution-2019-ncov-cases>

^[3] <https://www.npr.org/2020/03/09/813845222/u-s-forces-in-south-korea-and-italy-are-told-to-stay-put-as-coronavirus-spreads>

^[4] <https://www.rollcall.com/2020/03/13/no-availability-of-coronavirus-tests-for-troops-in-afghanistan/>

U.S. forces in Afghanistan. This is unacceptable given the sacrifice servicemembers have already made during the nearly 19-year war in Afghanistan.

While we understand that this crisis continues to evolve rapidly, it is essential that the proper actions be taken to address the danger posed to U.S. forces. This includes minimizing exposure of our nation's servicemembers, ensuring that testing is available to those who may experience symptoms, and rapidly and efficiently providing the proper treatment to those who become infected. To that end, we demand that the Department of Defense provide a detailed report on what contingencies are already in place, what actions are planned moving forward, and what resources are needed to properly meet the needs of our brave men and women in uniform. This report should also address the following questions:

- How many servicemembers stationed abroad, including in Afghanistan, have requested a COVID-19 test, and how many have already been tested?
- What is the protocol for individual servicemembers that feel ill while stationed abroad?
- For those deployed to Afghanistan, what is the protocol for those that fell ill or exhibit symptoms of COVID-19?

We thank you for your attention to this critical matter, and for your continued support for U.S. servicemembers.

Sincerely,



David N. Cicilline
Member of Congress



Mark Pocan
Member of Congress

House Members Co-Signing:

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Nanette Diaz Barragán
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